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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PMIL](#) [PGOV](#) [GB](#)  
SUBJECT: JOINT GABONESE-CHINESE MEDICAL-MILITARY EXERCISE  
REINFORCES INTEREST IN IRON-RICH REGION AND PROJECT

REF: LIBREVILLE 230

Classified By: Ambassador Eunice Reddick for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. From June 21-28, "Angel of Peace 2009," a joint Gabonese-Chinese medical-military exercise took place in Ogooue Ivindo province, the location of the proposed \$3 billion Chinese-funded Belinga iron mining project (Reftel). Notably, the formal ceremony included a simulation of an explosion at a manganese mine. Gabonese Minister of Defense Ali Bongo Ondimba and Vice Premier and Environment Minister Georgette Koko attended the opening and closing ceremonies. This was the third in a series of annual bilateral medical-military exercises in Gabon, each held in a different provincial capital and with a different international partner. Gabonese and Chinese medical teams provided free medical and dental care to the local population, and the Chinese gave the Gabonese military ten shipping containers of vehicles, medical equipment and supplies. A medical observer from U.S. Africa Command noted at the end of the exercise that the distribution of medical services was poorly organized and there was little sharing of expertise between the Chinese and Gabonese medical teams. END SUMMARY

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FIRST AFRICA DEPLOYMENT OF PLA MEDICAL TEAMS  
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¶2. (SBU) A week-long Gabonese-Chinese medical-military exercise called "Angel of Peace 2009" was kicked off on Sunday, June 21, 2009 in Makokou, the capital of Ogooue-Ivindo province. In his opening remarks, Defense Minister Ali Bongo Ondimba said that the exercise was a fitting tribute to the 35 years of close diplomatic relations between the two nations -- a relationship which included 13 official state visits by his father to China, the late president Omar Bongo Ondimba, during his 41 years in power. Also present at the opening ceremony were the new Minister of the Interior Jean-Francois Ndongou and Vice Prime Minister and Minister for the Environment Georgette Koko. VPM Koko told embassy officers that the choice of Ogooue-Ivindo province for this particular exercise was fortuitous, given the future development plans for the region, and would help foster goodwill among the local population.

¶3. (SBU) The senior Chinese military officer present, General Wan Qian, told the audience that the exercise was the first time a medical team from the People's Liberation Army had been deployed on the African continent. In all some 80 uniformed Chinese service members participated in the exercise. The number of Chinese military participating in the

opening ceremony was much larger than the Gabonese contingent by a factor of three or four times.

¶4. (SBU) The ceremony included a mock explosion at a local manganese mine and the rapid construction of a mobile medical unit complete with an X-ray facility, laboratory, and operating room. In addition to training Gabonese military and emergency medical response teams, the exercise included the delivery of free dental and medical care to the local population. An official from the Chinese embassy told us that in all 10 shipping containers of emergency medical equipment, including tents, medicine, laboratory equipment, and mobile medical units, were imported for the exercise. At the closing ceremony on June 28, all of the vehicles, equipment and supplies were given to the Gabonese army. The equipment will be stocked at four locations around the country for use during emergencies.

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POOR ORGANIZATION AND LIMITED EXCHANGE  
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¶5. (C) At the invitation of Minister Ali Bongo, the U.S. sent an observer from the Medical Plans and Operations Branch of the U.S. Africa Command to attend the exercise. At the end, she remarked to the Ambassador and DATT that the exercise was poorly organized, with little interaction between the Gabonese and Chinese medical teams. There was no intake system in place to address the large numbers of people that lined up for medical consultation and treatment, medications were in short supply, and many who waited hours for elective surgery were turned away. There was no visible training of the Gabonese medical teams on the equipment in

the mobile medical units and the surgery. At the end of each day the Chinese and Gabonese ate separately and parted ways for the evening.

¶6. (SBU) This is the third annual medical-military exercises of this kind in Gabon, each held in a different province and with a different bilateral partner nation. The first was held in 2007 in Moyen-Ogooue province, in cooperation with U.S. military. Last year's exercise was carried out with the French in Woleu-Ntem province. The Africa Command observer remarked that several participants in the 2009 exercise recalled the positive experience they had with U.S. military medical teams in 2007, including working together in mixed teams.

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COMMENT  
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¶7. (C) Despite the 30-day mourning period that has led to the cancellation of many activities in Gabon, the joint Gabonese-Chinese exercise went off as originally scheduled, Chinese Ambassador Li Fushun told us that some thought was given to delaying the exercise after President Bongo's death on June 8, but Gabon's government pressed for the schedule to be maintained. Given the controversial Belinga project, that still does not have an approved environmental impact study and has attracted vocal opposition among the usually timid Gabonese civil society, the choice of Ogooue-Ivindo province for the exercise with China surely was not a coincidence. The exercise provided an opportunity for the Chinese to improve their image with the humanitarian services they provided and interest in environmental protection. While laying the foundation for the medical infrastructure that will be needed to carry out the mining project, the donation of the medical equipment and services also allowed the Chinese to strengthen ties with the Gabonese military, headed by Ali Bongo Ondimba, the leading contender to succeed the late President Bongo.  
END COMMENT.

REDDICK